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Geelong's Phill Hulands hits the bags after winning the inaugural AABC Adaptive Boxing Championship; and (inset) with trainer Luke Harrison. Pictures: Brad Fleet

HULANDS OVERCOMES HIS DEMONS TO WIN BELT

ALL HAIL THE YAK ATTACK

Meg Saultry

Geelong father Phill Hulands breaks down in tears when he looks at his title belt.

While it is reward for the past four months of gruelling physical work in the ring, it is also symbolic of a much larger fight the wheelchair boxer has fought in his life.

An auto-immune disease diagnosis at the age of 21, which stripped him of mobility in his legs, sent the now father-of-six spiralling out of control and to the brink of despair.

But with an unrelenting support crew - led by head trainer Luke Harrison - Hulands has not only fought his way back, but to the top of the Australian adaptive boxing mountain.

THE NATION'S CHAMPION

The 40-year-old became the inaugural Australian Adaptive Boxing Council champion after a split decision victory over "Angry" Eddie Buttimore. He was handed his belt by Australian boxing icon Jeff Fenech.

"The next day I started crying, it was like 'I won the belt, I literally won the belt', it didn't sink in the first night, I had to take a couple more hours," Hulands said.

Having fought and lost to Buttimore earlier this year, Hulands and support worker and coach Luke Harrison went to work over the last four months to formulate a game plan which would win the belt at BoxingFit Port Melbourne.

"The first fight was really close too, it could have gone either way, but the only thing we could put it down to was Eddie threw a lot more punches," Harrison said.

"We spent four months working on more punches, and working on fitness and aerobic capacity."

While Buttimore came out the gate hot in the first round, landing several good punches, Hulands found an edge in the second and third rounds.

The trainer was confident that the ability of his charge he has nicknamed "The Boxing Yak" to outwork Buttimore would prove to be the difference – and so it turned out, on points.

"The third round, as he was on the left hand side, it's just, rip those hooks straight in, it felt good," Hulands said.

FIGHT FOR YOUR LIFE

Hulands' fightback in the title bout was symbolic of the war he has waged within over the past two decades.

Developing an auto-immune disease in 2007 at the age of 21, Hulands was told he would never walk again.

The shock diagnosis sent him into a deep depression and years of self-medication with alcohol.

"When I first started working with Phill he was still in that headspace, still depressed," Harrison said.

"But the more I worked with Phill and the more he got the bug for boxing, the more motivated I could see him becoming in life in general.

"He's out the front 15 minutes before I get there, every day I get a message, (saying) 'I'm out the front, I'm ready to go'.

It's at Complete Health Gym, owned by ex-bikie turned counsellor and personal trainer Troy Koerntjes, where Hulands' love of boxing has thrived over the last four years.

He trains three times a week through their free program, with another day spent at BoxingFit Port Melbourne.

Hulands' journey into combat sport has not been without its hurdles, as last-minute cancellations - a common occurrence in amateur boxing - kept the Yak outside the ropes.

Those last-minute setbacks hit Hulands hard. The sharp fall back to reality only opened the door for old vices to creep back into his consciousness.

"To see what boxing's done for Phill in his life ... he's more motivated as a person to go out and chase his goals, as opposed to drown his sorrows, it's a pretty big flip-around," Harrison said.

It's Hulands' attitude and resilience which inspired his moniker in the ring.

"The Boxing Yak" now has his own merchandise as a way to help fund his global boxing aspirations.

"I thought about the yak, it's an animal that sort of thrives in really cold, harsh conditions others don't enjoy," Harrison said. "With Phill's determination and motivation, I just thought it was a really appropriate fit for him."

GIVING ALL BOXERS AN OUTLET

Huland's desire to box was the spark behind the creation of the Australian Adaptive Boxing Council.

Harrison – who founded the AABC in Geelong in May – decided to create what was missing across Australia for adaptive boxing.

"For two years before that (launch), I'd been working with Phill to find an opponent," he said. "I just thought there was no one else in wheelchairs that wanted to fight."

But after finding an opponent for Hulands to fight in an exhibition bout, the AABC was able to show others what they set about creating. "There are people that want to fight, there's just nothing connecting them up," Harrison said.

Evolving organically, the AABC now has several members – including vision impaired boxers, and those with cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis and Leigh's disease.

And while it's come with a steep learning curve for Harrison, he said as soon as the fuse was lit, there was no going back.

Among the organisation's long-term goals is to support adaptive boxing in reaching the Paralympic Games.

"Everyone who is doing it, is doing it in a different way," Harrison said, with recognised Paralympic sports needing to be administered across several countries in a similar way.

"But with that said, we're all behind each other and supporting each other. We're all working towards the Paralympic dream."

Hulands will have a chance to chase that dream next year, with the Geelong pugilist punching his ticket to a fight on the world stage in America next year.

Hulands has begun fundraising for a trip to Virginia in September 2027 to fight as part of the United Adaptive Boxing Council's annual showcase.

"I'm enjoying this, I want to see how far I can take this and we're going to America next year," Hulands said. "To bring back Virginia's belt."

To support Hulands' fundraising efforts, head to the Climbing A Tornado From A Wheelchair page on Facebook or go to: gofund.me/0bb858e0e.

The team will also be at the Beckley Park Market on December 6, with supporters able to step into the ring for a round with Hulands.

For more information on the Australian Adaptive Boxing Council and Complete Health Gym, head to aabcboxing.com/ and completehealthgeelong.com.au



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